



England to India in Two Months : (2)

Let's continue with reading some excerpts from the journal written by my mother's step-father as he travelled on a troop ship from England to India back in 1917. We pick up the tale as the ship leaves Cape Town, heading up the east coast of Africa:

"During the afternoon we caught sight of a sea lion. The night turned out very rough, and we went to sleep and forgot to fasten the portholes and about four in the morning the waves dashed through and drenched all of us in our hammocks."

As they moved up the coast, the weather became steadily worse:

"The sea was very rough this morning and I was table orderly and as I was fetching the breakfast a big wave came over the side and knocked me over with the porridge in my hands. I was a sight, but then it's all in the game; there were others in the same plight."

At Durban in South Africa, they transferred to a smaller ship for the journey across the Indian Ocean to Bombay, a voyage that would be much more difficult than the first leg of their journey:

"... we turned into our hammocks, which we had slung on the middle deck as the lower decks were not fit to sleep in, as they swarmed with rats and vermin. ... We were at this time getting some bad food, as in the loaves of bread that we got we found insects alive, so you can guess what it is like on a troop-ship."

Their troubles mounted:

"This day we had a little sensation as the steering gear went wrong and all the other ships left us, and we were floating along, just drifting. Then we had another sensation, as the ship's doctor committed suicide by cutting his throat. He died about 11 o'clock, and was buried at sea at noon. He was an awful sight, so we saw a burial at sea."

There was worse to come:

"... we are fed up with sailing and the filthy surroundings. The weather now is almost unbearable. ... a storm broke over us and all through the night the rain came down in torrents, and big waves broke over the ship, and all our clothes were soaked. ... I went down below and pots and pans were flying all over the Lower Deck. ... about 5 o'clock [am] we ran into one of the worst things to be met at sea; we got into a typhoon, and the waves were running mountains high and swept over the ship and washed all kinds of things overboard, including the small boats, lifebelts, helmets, caps ... We had to cling to the rails, and we were drenched to the skin. I never expected to see the ship pull through it ... a worse nine hours, I have never experienced, and I don't want another. ... We thought our time had come."

Three weeks after leaving Cape Town, they arrived in Bombay, and transferred to trains for the 1500-mile, week-long journey to their camp near Rawal Pindi.

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"... getting outside of the town we saw the natives and their surroundings. Their houses were made of thatched straw and miserable little hovels they were too, and in the same hovels also lived their goats and hens. the stench as we passed them was awful."

The final leg of their journey was by truck, up into the mountains where their camp was located:

"... travelling round and round the mountain's side until we got to our destination. We had an exciting time as the roads twist and turn in an awkward manner. It was the best imitation of a figure eight that I have seen."

He wraps up the journal with a survey of the distances travelled - a total of more than 13,000 miles - and with these comments:

"... it has taken us 8 weeks and 2 days to accomplish, so you can imagine how we felt when we landed here. ... I hope that when we come back home, that we come back the shortest way through the Mediterranean sea, which will only take half the time."

"Well I think I have given you a good account of my travels which I hope will be pleasant reading ..."

It certainly is! Thank you to Private T. Howarth, of A Company, the 2nd North Staffordshire Regiment, Murree Hills, India. March ~ May, 1917